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ABSTRACT

This digest provides a critique of the various educational strategies that have been used with Latino students and suggests alternatives that may be more successful. Many educators acknowledge that the reasons for the historic academic underachievement of Latino students could be inappropriate cognitive, cultural, and linguistic teaching methods. However, they do not see that their own methods or tools cause students' problems. Instead, they claim that it is the students who have "special" needs. This "deficit" view of Latino students, also known as a cultural deprivation model, has had a severe negative influence on the education of Latino students. Many educators believe that the schools reinforce the existing social power relations among cultural groups. For success in teaching Latino children, educators must move beyond assumptions about the apolitical nature of education to a critical assessment of learning environments in their political contexts. New approaches to Latino student education should begin with teacher education that promotes cultural sensitivity and the active engagement of children from diverse backgrounds. Teachers can support social change in the classroom in a number of ways. In particular, teachers must learn to count Latino experiences and cultural capital as strengths. Respect for all is the cornerstone of effective education for all. (Contains 55 references.) (SLD)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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THE EDUCATION OF LATINO STUDENTS: IS SCHOOL REFORM ENOUGH?

With an overall population in the United States rapidly approaching 25 million, and a majority of the student population in some of the largest school districts, Latinos are arguably worse off today than in previous decades (Portes, 1996; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 1995a; 1995b; Valencia, 1991a; 1991b). Yet, the resilience of Latino students and their potential for academic success are significant (Díaz Salcedo, 1996). It is essential to capitalize on the strengths of Latino students because the economic and technological future of this country depends on their educational success, and the success of African Americans and Asians, since these three groups together will constitute an increasingly large portion of the total U.S. population by the mid twenty-first century.

This digest provides a critique of the various educational strategies that have been used with Latino students, and suggests alternatives that may prove more effective. Interestingly, some of the recommendations included here were first made nearly 20 years ago, but they have not yet been widely implemented.

Traditional Approaches to the Education of Latino Students

Historical Educational Practice

Many educators acknowledge that the reasons for the historical academic underachievement of Latino students could be inappropriate cognitive, cultural, and linguistic teaching methods. However, they do not believe that their own teaching methods or tools cause students' problems; rather, it is the students who are not "regular" and who have "special" needs. Such a traditional view also posits that teaching is a precise scientific undertaking, and that teachers are simply technicians who use a set of preselected skills and strategies in doing their jobs. Further, teaching techniques are based on the belief that schools and teaching are value-free and politically neutral. Consequently, change is required in children and families, not in the schools and teachers (see American Association of School Administrators, 1987; Carter & Chatfield, 1986; Knapp & Schields, 1990; Means & Knapp, 1991). These assumptions have absolved teachers from the need to critically analyze whether their teaching methods are equally effective with all student populations.

The "Deficit" View of Latino Students

The design, selection, and use of particular teaching methods arise from teachers' perceptions of the academic ability and worth of students. However, even the most pedagogically advanced strategies are ineffective in the hands of educators who believe that ethnic, racial, and linguistic minority students are at best culturally disadvantaged and in need of fixing, or, at worst, culturally or genetically inferior, and consequently beyond help. Explanations for the academic failure of Latinos (described as historical, pervasive, and disproportionate) have traditionally relied on such a deficit-based model, which has the longest history of any explanatory model for understanding the achievement of low-status students discussed in the education literature, and is deeply imprinted in our individual and collective psyches (Flores, 1982; 1993; Menchaca & Valencia, 1990; Valencia, 1986; 1991). Also known in the literature as the "social pathology" model or the "cultural deprivation" model, the deficit approach assigns disproportionate academic problems among low-status students (e.g., cognitive and linguistic deficiencies, low self-esteem, poor motivation) to pathologies or deficits in their sociocultural background (Valencia, 1986).

Subject to application of this deficit model, Latino students over the last century have been described as "mentally retarded," "linguistically handicapped," "culturally and linguistically deprived," "semi-lingual," and, more euphemistically, "at-risk" (Flores, 1982; 1993). The negative influence of this model has been shown in teachers' preference for Anglo students, bilingual teachers' preference for lighter skinned Latino students, and teachers' negative perceptions of working-class parents as compared to middle-class parents (Lareau, 1989; Bloom, 1991). In addition, unequal teaching and testing practices have been documented in schools serving working-class and ethnic minority students (Anyon, 1988; Díaz, Moll, & Mehan, 1986; Oakes, 1986; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1973). Educators (from all ethnic groups) who participated in the studies that produced these findings were unaware of the role they played in the differential and unequal treatment of their students, an indication of the insidious influence of the deficit model.

The deficit view of subordinated students has been

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critiqued by numerous researchers as ethnocentric and invalid (Boykin, 1983; Díaz et al., 1986; Flores, 1982; Flores, Cousin, & Díaz, 1991; Sue & Padilla, 1986; Trueba, 1989; Walker, 1987). More recent research offers alternative models that shift the explanation of school failure away from the characteristics of individual children, their families and cultures, and toward the schooling process (Au & Mason, 1983; Heath, 1983; Mehan, 1992; Philips, 1972). Unfortunately, however, many of these alternative models have unwittingly given rise to a kinder and more liberal, yet still pernicious, version of the deficit model, and continue to consider subordinated students in need of "fixing" or "specialized" modes of instruction. This equation of difference with deficit, especially as it relates to Latinos and other low socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups, is deeply ingrained in the ethos of even the most prominent institutions and educational programs.

Educational Reform Strategies

An increasing number of research studies in recent years have found traditional education practices ineffective for Latino students. The studies have identified educational programs, albeit based on the more "liberal" version of the deficit model, that work successfully with Latino student populations limited in their English proficiency (American Association of School Administrators, 1987; Carter & Chatfield, 1986 ; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Tikunoff, 1985). In addition, efforts have been made to identify teaching strategies that are more effective with culturally and linguistically "different" students, limited English proficient students, and other "disadvantaged" and "at-risk" students (McLeod, in press; Knapp & Shields, 1990; Means & Knapp, 1991; Tinajero & Ada, 1993). Often, prospective teachers will imbue the "new" methods and curricula with almost magical properties that render them, alone, capable of improving students' academic standing. However, while it is important to identify promising instructional programs and strategies, it is erroneous to assume that the automatic replication or teacher mastery of any particular methods will guarantee successful student learning.

Such a myopic focus on methodology obfuscates the central question: why linguistically and culturally "subordinated" students (often also children from economically oppressed families) do not, in general, succeed academically. Some scholars feel that the reason may be that schools reproduce the existing asymmetrical power relations among cultural groups (Anyon, 1988; Gibson & Ogbu, 1991; Giroux, 1992; Freire, 1985). If they are correct, then educators must move beyond the "methods fetish" (Bartolomé, 1994), and erroneous assumptions about the apolitical nature of education, to a critical assessment of learning environments in their political contexts.

New Approaches to Latino Student Education

Teacher Preparation

It is important to help teacher education students acquire a sophisticated understanding of the learning environment. Teachers need to possess the necessary subject matter knowledge and methodological skills to teach. They also need skills to critically analyze exemplary pedagogy and to translate it into cultural and linguistic codes appropriate for their students (Freire, 1973; 1987; 1993; 1995). Teacher preparation programs are now making efforts to help teachers develop such skills. The nature and extent of the changes to traditional programs are a matter of speculation and experimentation, but the need for a fundamentally different ideological basis is firm.

Student teachers must also be helped to develop the confidence to create, adapt, or reform teaching strategies in order to actively engage children in the learning process, challenge them, and demonstrate respect for them. Taking a sociohistorical view of students from diverse cultural groups and poor families can help teachers understand how important it is to acknowledge students' home language and culture, and how eradication of them can be interpreted as a form of dehumanization. Further, if teachers already recognize that getting a job, finding a home, and surviving are not politically neutral activities, then they will understand that teaching is also not a politically neutral undertaking. Indeed, educational institutions mirror the culture, values, and norms of the greater society. Thus, educators need to make concerted efforts to prevent the reproduction of the asymmetrical power relationships existing in the various social and cultural strata of the larger society.

Teachers should examine school practices critically so that they do not unintentionally promote tracking and segregation within the school and classroom, thus perpetuating the status quo. For example, schools often consider low socioeconomic status and a "minority" racial/ethnic background of students characteristics of "deficit" individuals, and therefore likely to indicate low academic achievement (Anyon, 1988; Bloom, 1991; Cummins, 1989; Ogbu, 1974; 1978; 1981; 1982; 1983; 1991; 1992). Such a gratuitous conclusion lowers teachers' expectations of certain students, which in turn can compromise their potential for academic success.

Educational Strategies

Teachers can support positive social change in the classroom in a variety of ways. They can create heterogeneous learning groups for the purpose of modifying low-status roles of certain individuals and groups. Cohen (1986) shows that teachers can create learning conditions where students perceived as having low status (e.g., limited English speakers in a classroom where

English is the dominant language, students with academic difficulties, those perceived by their peers as less competent) can demonstrate their knowledge and expertise. Then, the students can see themselves, and be seen by others, as capable and competent. Such "democratic" contexts engage all students in peer learning activities without isolating or ranking them, and foster self-confidence and academic motivation.

Additional approaches, such as language experience, process writing, reciprocal teaching, and whole language activities, can also create humanizing learning environments where low-status Latino students receive academically rigorous instruction (Cohen, 1986; Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; Palinscar & Brown, 1984; Pérez & Torres-Guzmán, 1992; Zamel, 1982). These approaches capitalize on students' existing knowledge (including linguistic and cultural knowledge) and experiences, and are enriching and cognitively challenging. Learning occurs when prior knowledge is accessed and linked to new information; new information is understood and stored by calling up the appropriate knowledge framework and then integrating the new information (Jones, Palinscar, Ogle, & Carr, 1987). Acknowledging and using existing student language and knowledge makes good pedagogical sense, and it also constitutes an affirming experience for those students who feel dehumanized and disempowered in the schools.

Students learn from and value each other's language and life experiences in classrooms where they speak a language and possess cultural capital closely matching those of the society at large (Anyon, 1988; Lareau, 1989; Winfield, 1986). This is precisely what needs to happen for the culturally different child; Latino experiences and cultural capital need to be counted as strengths. The incorporation of students' language, culture, and experiential knowledge should not conflict with teachers's responsibility for providing students with particular academic content knowledge and learning skills. The teacher is the authority, but he/she does not have to authoritarian. Teacher and students jointly construct knowledge, building on what students bring to class. Teaching is not "fixing" students; it is discovering with students new ideas, new values, and new worlds of hope. Teachers must convey in their daily work the conviction that they are committed to humanizing the educational experience of students by eliminating hostility, and replacing messages of distrust or disdain with respect for all. This approach is precisely what Freire has taught in his "pedagogy of hope" (1995).

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